



Study for Camino Real
1967 (ca.)
Gouache on blueprint
paper
44.8 x 40.3 cm

Anni Albers

No one could beat Anni Albers for the concision of her language, her ability to write prose that was diamond-sharp and at the same time utterly beguiling in content. Just as her textiles reveal an unimpeachable sense of purpose, a total facility with technique, the know-how to choose the best possible materials and honour their possibilities while respecting rather than fighting their limitations, a feeling for poetic beauty alongside a keen sense of proportion, so does her intelligent, musical use of the English language combine exactitude with spiritedness. Anni had learned weaving and textile construction – and, later in life, printmaking – because that's where she had the opportunity to prevail at doing what she wanted; similarly, although she lived in Germany until she was thirty-three, and spoke its language almost exclusively – except for the smattering of English from the Irish governess her parents had employed in her luxurious childhood – when she and her husband Josef then fled to the United States, she mastered English in the same way that she had gained such excellence in thread.

She learned the rules while acquiring the ability to play, adhering to impeccable standards while enjoying the rich pleasures of fantasy and allowing her flair and originality to sing. Anni's hero, linguistically as well as intellectually, was Alfred North Whitehead; she wanted to write with his perfect pitch as well as his intellect, just as, in textiles, she had tried to match the skill and poetry of artists ranging from anonymous pre-Columbian weavers to Paul Klee, while always going her own distinct way.

So this is the rare instance of an artist whose words are a superb guide to her work and the overall nature of her aesthetic approach. Consider the following excerpt from Anni's 1965 essay "Designing as Visual Organization":

For anyone who is making something that previously did not exist in this form is, at that point, of necessity an amateur. How can he know how this thing is done that never has been done before? Every designer, every artist, every inventor or discoverer of something new is in that sense an amateur. And to explore the untried, he must be an adventurer. For he finds himself alone on new ground. He is left to his own devices and must have imagination and daring. All decisions here are his own, and only he is responsible. But though it is he who is in charge, he feels himself to be only an intermediary who is trying to help the not-yet-existent turn into reality.

Standing between the actual and that which may be, the conscientious designer, as I see it, seeks to forego his own identity in order to be able more impartially to interpret the potential. For the less he himself, his subjectivity, stands in the way of the object that is to take form, the more it will have "objective" qualities and thereby will also take on a more lasting character than it otherwise could. And just as concern with material and method of treatment engages his conscious mind and frees the formative energies that we recognise when crystallised as ideas, so also, and to the same end, does the tête-à-tête with the still-amorphous absorb his self-awareness.

These words articulate, to a "t", the journey of Anni Albers's life and the particular quality of all her art work. She had the bravery of a warrior on the front lines, yet the modesty of a humble foot soldier. When she went to the Bauhaus, that decision represented a willingness to give up the luxuries and presumed life of ease that few women of her era resisted. That's because she was totally sure of her passion for art, even as she was entirely unsure of how she would make it, who would provide emotional support, how she would survive. She believed in herself, but had even more faith in the art of any culture and any era that was devoted to visual beauty, to efficaciousness, whether it was a practical object or a piece intended only to enhance existence on a more purely spiritual level. Her words from that essay have the yin and yang of her thinking, the marvellous balances and counterpoint of her textiles and prints: "inventor... amateur... imagination... decisions... in charge... not-yet-existent... lasting... formative... crystallised... still-amorphous." Anni's world, her materials, her wall hangings and upholstery fabrics and jewellery and drawings of meandering lines and prints of patterns locked into a grid, all juxtapose what is very solid and sure and steady with what is adventurous, uncertain, mysterious.

This is why Anni Albers, with her fabulous eye, her wisdom, her humour, her will to surprise, is without question one of the major artists of the twentieth century, a designer and philosopher who was consistent in the purity of her approach and her feeling for adventure. To view what she did is to be treated to a never-ending adventure of our own.

Nicholas Fox Weber